

World Literature, Industrialization, and the Two Faces of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction

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Abstract: In "World Literature, Industrialization, and the Two Faces of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction" Yiping Wang discusses contemporary Chinese science fiction against the backdrop of the influence of world literature and the development of industrialization in China. Wang argues that two sides represented respectively by Liu Cixin and Han Song constitute the feature of contemporary Chinese science fiction. The side characterized by the works of Liu Cixin is the close connection with world science fiction and the positive attitude and consistency with technological innovation and industrialization in China while the other side has Han Song as its representative, whose works, with similarities to high literature of world canons and the mainstream Chinese literature, reflect on the development of technology and industrialization focusing on individuals and disasters in the shadow of modernization. These two sides join together in the illustration of the basic image of science fiction in contemporary Chinese literature. By absorbing the essence of world literature and echoing the concerns of the nation, contemporary Chinese science fiction surmounts the hierarchy of literary genres and make its way into the active center of world literature.

Keywords: World Literature(s); Chinese Science Fiction; Industrialization; Liu Cixin; Han Song

For Chinese literature, science fiction is a literary genre originating from world literature. Meanwhile, science fiction in China echoes the process of Chinese industrialization and modernization. In my study I explore the feature of Chinese science fiction against the backdrop of the influence of world literature and the development of industrialization and argue that the two sides represented respectively by science fiction writers Liu Cixin and Han Song constitute the feature of contemporary Chinese science fiction. Seen from its development in China, science fiction is typically influenced by world literature and starkly marked by foreignness from the outset. According to Dong Renwei, a senior science fiction writer and activist, Chinese science fiction unfolds itself by stages as follows: the initial stage (from the late Qing dynasty till the early Republic of China

1900-1949), developing stage (from the founding of PRC, 1949-1991), mature stage (from the publication of *Science Fiction World* 1991-2009) and the golden stage (from 2010 till now) (2-27). Here I focus on the basic features of science fiction in mainland China since 2000 against the backdrop of the overall development of Chinese science fiction.

At its initial stage from the late Qing dynasty until the early Republic of China, Chinese science fiction mainly takes the form of scientific novels (“科学小说”). In the late Qing, scientific novels entered China as overseas fiction (“域外小说”). On 14 November 1902, *海底旅行* (Travel under the Sea) adapted from Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* and translated by Lu Jidong (卢藉东), was serialized in *New Novels* (新小说), a monthly periodical founded by Liang Qichao (梁启超), an influential thinker and politician. Labeled “the latest scientific novel in the West,” this novel was translated from French, English, Japanese, and Chinese in succession. And the term “scientific novels” was probably derived from the Japanese translation (Ren 2). During this period, Liang Qichao translated a short story “The Last Days of Earth” (1891) by Camille Flammarion from the Japanese version, which was later, in 1902, entitled *世界末日记* (The Doom of the World). Influenced by Edward Bellamy's 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward* and the 1886 Japanese political novel *雪中梅* (Plum in the Snow) (see Long and Cai 6-7), Liang Qichao also wrote in 1902 *新中国未来记* (The Future of a New China), a political fantasy novel, in which Liang envisaged China in 1962. In this period, Lu Xun (鲁迅), one of the most important writers of modern Chinese literature, was also keen on translating scientific novels and translated several of Verne's novels.

As a literary genre originating from world literature, writers of science fiction develop a national variant from world science fiction canons in China. Chinese science fiction maintains a classic story frame, absorbs ingredients of national literatures and imagines continuously a broad vision of world, hence a natural mediator between world literature and national literatures. These features, however, bring both advantages and disadvantages to the development of “domestic” Chinese science fiction. As an “other” from abroad, science fiction feels alienated from Chinese cultural backgrounds, social forces, and literary traditions. As Han Song exemplifies, science fiction is different from Wuxia (武侠), the novel

concerns the adventures of sword-wielding heroes, in which the swordsman spirit is rooted in Chinese culture since ancient times, while science fiction has not developed until China began to strive for its modernization ("Science Fiction" <<http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2019/0203/c405057-30611123.html>>). Not well-established in China, science fiction is vulnerable in confronting of tides of the times.

The understanding of contemporary Chinese science fiction demands specific exploration of its historical and social conditions it faces, as well as its characteristics. During the period from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, Chinese science fiction has as its main motif saving and rejuvenating the nation and correspondingly echoes a specific requirement of the times, that is, the theme of industrialized development. For example, in the late Qing dynasty, Xu Zhiyan (许指严) wrote in 1909 a science fiction novel entitled *电世界* (The Electricity World), in which he imagined how a "king of electricity" opens a power plant to revitalize the nation and reform the world using electricity as core technology. The glorious deeds made by the "king of electricity" represent the trend from reinvigorating the nation through "science" to "scientists governing the nation" which is one of the spiritual sources of "scientism" and "engineers governing the nation" later in China (Li, "Chinese King" 45). Then came the "renaissance" of science fiction starting in 1978 when Ye Yonglie (叶永烈) published *小灵通漫游未来记* (A Bright Boy's Travel to the Future), the most influential and bestseller of science fiction in China with a cumulative circulation of over 3 million. The novel pictured a highly industrialized utopia, Future City, where a human-made sun is set above the Antarctic, self-driving jet cars without tires are manufactured at China's No. 88 Auto Plant, human-made food plant is mainly staffed by robots, and car-size watermelons are produced at farming factories, etc. In the novel there are citizens who hold multiple positions such as a painter and engineer, or as chemistry teacher and director at the food factory (see Ye 56). As can be seen, the fine aspiration for such an industrialized society in *A Bright Boy's Travel to the Future* not only involves its advanced technology, but implies that it has satisfied the utopian proposition like all-around development of humanity. The dream of industrialization and development is presented in "national allegories" by science fiction writers: in a sense, Mingwei Song is right in

saying that a significant motif of Chinese science fiction is to present "the myth of development" together with its ethical and technological effects ("Variations" 91).

In contrast to the past, in the twenty-first century, China has established an integrated modern industrial system, even reached the late stage of industrialized development according to the composite indicator of industrialization (see Huang 9) and realized scenarios seen as pure fantasies in novels like A Bright Boy's 'Travel to the Future. In today's China, although there is reflection on the worship of industry and technology, the prevalent thought is intertwined closely with the grand process of industrialization and modernization, hence new features are in company with major issues like technological innovation and the upgrade of industrial sectors. At the initial and middle stages of industrialization, China successfully evolved from an agricultural nation to an industrial nation through the "factor-driven" strategy, namely, driving economic growth by means of low-cost, large-scale input of essential factors like investment, labor, resources and environment, while against the present background of a new industrial revolution, China has arrived at the late stage of industrialization, which requires "innovation-driven strategy" in order to achieve sustainable economic development through technological and institutional innovation (see Huang 11). And "technological innovation" asks for an active spiritual impetus, as well as an integrated ecosystem which helps with the realization of gradual innovations. Therefore, the Chinese government advocates a spirit of innovation focusing on scientific and technological creativity. Science fiction is influenced by technological development and possesses a high degree of imagination and creativity, thus at a unique advantage in spreading scientific culture and inspiring scientific exploration and technological development. In 2018, for example, when launching its first Falcon Heavy rocket, Elon Musk's company SpaceX sent into space a Tesla car, on whose screen appeared "Don't Panic" from Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

It is not difficult to find that since Jules Verne, writers of so-called "hard science fiction" or "technological science fiction" have shown belief in the development of science and technology and placed emphasis on the specific design of realistically new technology in the future, both of which

indicate that writers give credit to the value of technological innovations. This category of science fiction has exerted influence on Chinese science fiction. As early as the initial stage, science fiction has shown anxiety over technological development as in the first recognized science fiction text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. But whatever value standpoint and ideological tendency held by science fiction writers, science fiction is usually assuming as its basic feature the assimilation of new technological advances, as well as the communication and exploration of science and technology through literary imagination. When it comes to the subject-matter and motif of science fiction, it always stands for the interaction of society, humanity, emotions and science, technology and industries. In this sense, with frequent criticisms of science and technology and exhortations about technological advances in it, science fiction keeps in line with the trend in contemporary China like "technological innovations." As Jing Tsu quotes from Wu Yan, a Chinese Science fiction writer and scholar, "it is very rare for a work of fiction to win the support of three major constituencies, the government, popular readers and intellectuals" however, Chinese science fiction now enjoys all three" <<https://complit.yale.edu/news/professor-jing-tsu-writes-about-chinese-science-fiction-financial-times>>).

The backbone of contemporary Chinese science fiction is a currently active group of science fiction writers labeled as "the new generation" and "the newer generation" born between 1960s and 1980s, most well known of whom are Wang Jinkang (王晋康), Liu Cixin, Han Song, He Xi (何夕), Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆), Qian Lifang (钱莉芳), Hao Jingfang (郝景芳), Jia Liyuan (贾立元), Wang Yao (王瑶) (see Dong 74-79). Different from Western science fiction developing in a phased fashion, contemporary Chinese science fiction takes on a prosperous coexistence, of which the most noticeable is its different sides in stark counterpoint to each other. And these two sides join together in the illustration of the basic image of contemporary Chinese science fiction. What is characteristic of mainstream Chinese science fiction, a side represented by the works of Liu Cixin, is the intimacy with classical tradition in world science fiction canons and consistency with industrialization and technological innovation in Chinese society. Liu Cixin, now a professional science fiction writer, graduated from Hydropower Engineering Department, North China University of Water Resources and Hydropower and worked

for a long time as an engineer in the electricity sector in China. He has won multiple awards for his work, among which are the Galaxy Prize, the highest prize for Chinese science fiction and the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015. He has also been nominated for the Hugo Award and Nebula Award, both major international awards in the field of science fiction. When recounting the impacts he has ever received, Liu Cixin mentions Jules Verne's and Arthur C. Clarke's works. In correspondence with the impacts received from Western science fiction, Liu Cixin's works usually reveal the courage to probe the unknown universe, the faith in unstoppable advances of science and technology, and exquisite yet rigorous imagination of technology.

In terms of subject matter, Liu Cixin writes often about the struggle for survival from the perspective of vulnerable race (in most cases humans) in the universe: limited resources in the universe compel people to compete against each other and fight for survival (see Wang and Wang 134-37). As is shown in his *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy, earth beings are involved in a lengthy and accelerating struggle against the Trisolaris from a remote planet with advanced technology, which is a gradual revelation of axioms of "sociology of the universe" all through the trilogy that in the universe as a Dark Forest where the law of the jungle is practiced, the first axiom is "survival as the first need of civilization," the second axiom "the continuous growth and expansion of civilization with the constancy of the total amount of matter in the universe" and there also exists "doubt chains" between races in the universe. With these axioms and concepts in focus, Liu Cixin delineates interracial competitions and battles with lots of conspiracies and suspense in which many heroes highlight wisdom, deceit, nobility, solemnity, and loneliness, etc. between human beings and the Trisolaris. Liu Cixin's works show realistic dimensions: social evolutionism sounds plausible and the races lagging behind in modernization naturally possess a strong awareness of crisis. Since the late Qing Dynasty, how to win the competition against others and strive for national prosperity remains an important motif. The answer offered by Liu Cixin is best compressed as the "imagination of technology" which is founded on modern industrial techniques and advanced manufacturing abilities and this narration brings Liu Cixin's stories to life and gives an impetus to characters' actions and plots. His *The Wandering Earth* begins in this way:

Dark did not mean darkness. The Earth Engines brightly illuminated the whole Northern hemisphere. They had been installed all across Asia and North America -- only the solid tectonic plate structure of these two continents could withstand the enormous thrust they exerted. In total, there were twelve thousand engines scattered across the Eurasian and North American plains ... Imagine an enormous palace, as big as the Parthenon on the Acropolis. Inside the palace, countless massive columns rise up to the vaulted ceiling, each one blazing with the blue-white light of fluorescent tube. And you, you are just a microbe on the palace's floor. That was the world I lived in. Actually, that description was not totally accurate. It was the tangential thrust component generated by the engines that halted the Earth's rotation. Because of this, the engine jets needed to be set at a very precise angle, causing the massive beams to slant across the sky. It was like the grand palace that we live in was teetering on the verge of collapse! (3-4)

In *The Wandering Earth* Liu Cixin envisages the desperate survival of human being from a crisis: scientists make a prediction that the transformation of the Sun into a red giant in the future with helium flash will devour the earth while humans devise an escape plan to move the earth out of the solar system by means of human invention. Earth Engines is the very force to help the earth escape from the solar system and find a new home. The escape engines are compared to "massive columns" in holy temples of the Acropolis and represent myths in the age of science and technology, thus venerated by people as temples. Manufacturing and operating tens of thousands of "massive columns" indeed signify superb science and technology and manufacturing capacities. And this description "is so thrilling by skillfully combining modern industrial products and religious architectures significant as the origin of civilization that it allows individual human readers to witness in person super modern industrial creations" (Li, "Light" 57-58). For all chaos and frustrations humans experience later in their "wandering," leviathans stand for the soaring technological level of humans, actually a guarantee of self-redemption and the greatest creation in the Anthropocene. Similar to leviathans is the probe of Trisolaran Fleet called "the droplet" by humans in *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy, the probe was only 3.5 meters long, and "was a perfect teardrop shape, round at the head and pointy at the tail, with a surface so

smooth it was a total reflector. The Milky Way was reflected on its surface as a smooth pattern of light that gave the mercury droplet a pure beauty. Its droplet shape was so natural that observers imagined it in a liquid state, one for which an internal structure was impossible" (Liu, *The Dark Forest* 429). Simple as it may appear, the probe destroys two thousand well-armed spaceships of human beings once and for all without difficulty. The probe is not so much a "mysterious wonder" as virtually a perfect industrial product. Like the "massive columns," by using advanced industrial materials and techniques, it is "straighter than the straightest line, more circular than a perfect circle" (Liu, *The Dark Forest* 430), manufactured in accordance with modern aesthetic standards of simplicity and function-orientation. It is these technological creations imagined at length that develop the story in a convincing way. For example, Earth Engines allowing humans to wander together with the earth, the droplet plunging humans into deep reflection after the rout, thus driving the story of survival struggle in the universe forward.

Liu Cixin both absorbs the essence of early hard science fiction and the novels in the Golden Age, and carries forward the development of Chinese science fiction from pioneers. Although different in style from fantasies in *The Electricity World*, Liu Cixin makes a similar choice in the creation of civilization by industry and technology as the redeemer to the world when facing crises. His enthusiastic imagination of science and technology corresponds to the positive discourse of progress. Whether colossal or delicate, creations of technology, that is, the so-called "beauty of industry" are representative of great creativity, technical capacity, and sublimity of human exploration of the universe. Corresponding to this grand narration of progress is the massive length, large varieties of story clues, and magnificent images in the universe in his novels. In general, in current contexts of Chinese social development, Liu Cixin represents the mainstream and the high level of contemporary Chinese science fiction, reviving and renewing Chinese science fiction.

The other side has Han Song -- another leading writer in science fiction -- as its representative, whose works with similarities to high literature of world canons and the mainstream Chinese literature reflect on technology, industrial development, and modernization. To certain extent, Liu Cixin and Han Song stand opposite to each other: what is lacking in Liu Cixin's

works can be seen in Han Song's. With a B.A. degree in English and a Master of Arts degree in journalism and communication from Wuhan University, Han Song works full-time at the Xinhua News Agency, a mainstream medium in China. Han Song is at roughly the same age as Liu Cixin, yet different from the latter in educational backgrounds and working experiences, which perhaps leads to different literary views. His major works include *2066年之西行漫记* (Journey to the West 2066) (2000), *红色海洋* (Red Sea) (2004), *地铁* (Subway) (2011), *高铁* (High-Speed Train) (2012), and *医院* (Hospital) (2016). His 2011 novel *Subway* is divided into five parts: in "The Last Subway" Lao Wang, a civil servant working overtime, witnesses a group of dwarfs transporting passengers in the platform at midnight while the world on the ground remains undisturbed, in "Changes" Zhou Xing, Lao Wang's son-in-law, takes the subway on a seemingly never-ending journey, in which with the passage of time passengers begin to have sex, give birth, eat others, grow old, and even mutate into new species, in "Signs" Xiao Wu led by a girl Ka Ka explores a deserted world beneath the subway tunnels and discovers that the abandoned "new subway" is but a failure of the governmental project of "universalization" where he sees patients with atrophy, finless porpoises with human faces, and dwarfs, in "Paradise" people who survive the big explosion in the underground world evolve into various species and encounter wolves, rats, and an autonomous community, and in "Ruins" in a far future when human descendants are driven away from the earth and have to struggle for life in the asteroid belt, Wu Shui and Lu Zhu are sent to the earth in exploration of the mystery of human extinction.

As far as the impacts of world canons are concerned, in *Subway* Han Song makes several references to Dante's *Divina Commedia* and protagonists in the novel meet with a varieties of living creatures in weird shapes and with different thoughts in the underground world: an echo of Dante's journey in hell. Of course, different from Dante's one-way journey, the journey in *Subway* is full of mysteries and chaos. Interestingly enough, as Dante has Beatrice as an ideal guide, so protagonists have guides or partners for company on their journey in *Subway*, who, nevertheless, are either slaughtered by other protagonists or sacrifice themselves for them. *Divina Commedia* ends up in *Paradise*, the same title to the next-to-last part in *Subway*, but the "Paradise" in the minds of the

underground species turns out to be a cruel ordinary world. And the last chapter "Ruins" tells how underground human descendants return to earth to explore the ruined subway, a desolate and rotten world inhabited by rats now. It is not difficult to find that Han Song borrows traditional classics of world literature to achieve a postmodernist transformation and subversion. Han Song is recommended as "A Kafka Confined to an Electronic Cage" on the front cover of *Subway*. Not until many years after the completion of the novel, as Jia Liyuan confirmed, did Han Song begin to read Kafka extensively (Jia 43). However, numerous researchers have agreed on the shadow of Kafka in Han Song's novels (see, e.g., Chen). What is revealed in Han Song's novels (darkness, mystery, grotesqueness, loneliness, uncertainty and anxiety over existence in modern time, and a highly metaphorical and allegorical writing style) evidences his absorption of the thoughts in modern and postmodern literature.

Like Liu Cixin, Han Song also shows concern over modern industrial civilization in the form of modern transport like subways and high-speed trains. In tracing the history of subway construction, Han Song mentions the world's first subway in the United Kingdom in the preface to the novel, yet unlike the simple and powerful image of "massive columns" and the "droplet" in Liu Cixin's novels, the high speed and efficiency represented by the subway indicates "technical nations without history" and the ironic processes of "universalization," industrialization, and internationalization. In *Subway*, he depicts "The city has been hollowed out underground, billions of years of rock structure totally altered. Subways will allegedly connect cities at home and abroad so as to form an international integration ... 'The world's largest rail market has taken shape rapidly in here, with hundreds of millions of people sinking underground and living a life entirely different from their ancestors thousands of years ago' (59). Stressing the idea of "shadows" behind industrialization and modernization, Han Song deals with aspects of life that Liu Cixin neglects, like commuting by subway, mechanical daily routines, saving up for a car, fitting in with city life, difficulty and high cost of getting medical service, personal emotional and sexual distress, etc., and Han Song portrays the dark image of modern world: "Passengers, like water monsters, sit in silence at the bottom of the glass filled with green fluid. He still remembers the look in the child's eyes: empty, cold, confused, disappointed,

suspicious, resentful, strange" (Subway 53). In such works as *Red Sea* and *Subway*, Han Song also makes frequent use of racial disasters and wars as background, but in a different way from Liu Cixin. Both in a huge span of time and space, Liu Cixin's novels are concerned with how races as communities struggle for survival through courage and wisdom, while Han Song's lonely individuals are overwhelmed by daily life. His focus is placed on embodied individuals, that is, individual emotional and physical crises. Further, Liu Cixin writes in a clear language while Han Song adopts defamiliarized language, like "watered by corrupted rain, exotic flowers and herbs thrive on the streets sprinkled with spit, waste paper and semen. They are genetically modified tropical plants. Cars crawl along in a queue just like ghosts" (Subway 93).

As Mingwei Song puts it, Chinese science fiction in the past was identified as a literary category for providing science education and entertainment, thus deficient in profound thoughts. But the emerging science fiction of contemporary time breaks the restrictions of genre and penetrates the system of contemporary Chinese culture through rich imagination and sharp mind ("Seeing" 153). Apparently inheriting the hope and disappointment toward "enlightenment" of Chinese intellectuals since Lu Xun, Han Song's works carry out the similar literary experiment as in 1980s the Chinese avant-garde writers like Yu Hua (余华), Ma Yuan (马原), etc. Therefore, Han Song integrates into science fiction what he has digested and recreated from both world classic canons, modern thoughts, and the avant-garde experiment of modern Chinese literature. Representative of the other side of contemporary Chinese science fiction, he resorts to literary classics for the creation of science fiction and reforms mainstream literature by using science fiction and has reached a new height of literary creation.

The two sides represented by Liu Cixin and Han Song constitute the basic features of contemporary Chinese science fiction. In terms of literary creation, Liu Cixin emphasizes "core values" embodied by the positive concept of science and technology in the Golden Age of science fiction (see Wang 75), that is, inheriting and carrying forward classical traditions of world science fiction. He shows an explicit rejection of postmodern literature: "today's practitioners of literature have lost that creativity. Their minds give birth only to shattered fragments and freaks, whose brief lives

are nothing but cryptic spasms devoid of reason. 'Then they sweep up these fragments into a bag they peddle under the label 'postmodern' or 'deconstructionist' or 'symbolism' or 'irrational'" (Liu, *The Dark Forest* 85). Owing to this, Liu Cixin fails to benefit from the reformed literary concepts and ways of expression in postmodern literature. Conversely, Han Song, after absorbing mainstream literature both at home and abroad and many thoughts and techniques of modern and postmodern works, manifests spiritual qualities parallel to contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature like experimental, ironical and absurd ones. At the same time, Liu Cixin and Han Song differ in their attitudes toward social trends in terms of industrialization and modernization, the myth of development, and the social role of science and technology. They represent different even opposite ideas held by groups with similar disciplinary background to them in general (natural sciences and the arts and humanities), as well as the tension between them in China.

Science fiction visualizes alternative worlds full of novelty and goes beyond specific local contexts, which endows science fiction with unique power: "science fiction as a genre has the versatility of not being tied to any side of history or its interpretation; it offers instead multiple departures for the future." (Tsu <<https://complit.yale.edu/news/professor-jing-tsu-writes-about-chinese-science-fiction-financial-times>>). As Veronica Hollinger puts it, "science fiction is currently an international language in the globalized world" (35). With contemporary Chinese science fiction thriving progressively and emerging on the landscape of world literature, science fiction writers seem to feel that a kind of "world story" or "human story" in contrast to a purely local "Chinese" that could be a better tool of communication. For example, *The Wandering Earth* (which has been made into a film) seems to mix disputable ideas like nationalism; however, authors of such national literatures tend to create grand transnational stories concerning the world, humankind and the universe. The fiction, as well as its authors acts, consciously or unconsciously, as the go-between in the communication between world literature and national literatures, and the channel of interactions and variations, thus reconstructing world literature(s). Therefore, in the network of world literature composed jointly by national literatures, science fiction, like a "rope" with knots in free connection, can create new

literary contexts through intertwining threads of various literary traditions, thus vibrating and even transforming national literatures and network of world literature: for example by reforming the conservative hierarchy of literary genres within national literatures and by adding a new vigor to the overall development and change of literature.

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